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SUBJECT: MINORITY LEADERS CONCERNED ABOUT IRAQI CENSUS

Classified By: Classified by Political Counselor Yuri Kim for reason 1.  
4 (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) As Ministry of Planning officials continue their preparations for a nationwide census this fall, many of Iraq's ethnic and religious minority leaders have raised concerns about how the census will be administered and whether it will provide an accurate reflection of their communities' demographics. Christian leaders expect the census to reveal dramatic declines in their numbers and are concerned that the GOI is not being sufficiently proactive in extending the census to their refugee communities in Syria and Jordan. Sabeen-Mandean and Baha'i leaders view the census as an opportunity for their communities to be officially counted. At the same time, Yezidi and Shabak leaders worry that Kurdish security forces may pressure their communities to declare themselves Kurds as their villages are located in Arab-Kurd disputed territories. Turkmen leaders have threatened to boycott the census all together. The census has particular significance for Iraq's various ethnic and religious minorities, who feel that their political representation is not commensurate with the size of their communities. End summary.

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The Nuts and Bolts  
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¶2. (C) In September 2008, Iraq's Parliament approved a census law that directed the Ministry of Planning to conduct a national census in October 2009. Dr. Mehdi al-Alak, Deputy Minister of Planning and Head of Iraq's Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology (COSIT) told Poloff that that COSIT is preparing for a nation-wide census to take place on Oct. 24. According to Dr. al-Alak and Dr. Georges Georgi of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the census is being supported by an Amman-based technical team from UNFPA and through assistance provided by the Government of Egypt. In June, COSIT completed pilot census projects in nine provinces (Najaf, Dhi Qar, Baghdad, Diyala, Anbar, Salah ad Din, Ninawah, Kirkuk, Sulaimaniyah). At the start of July, COSIT initiated training for census field teams. Al-Alak said that some 40,000 teams are currently working to list and map local communities across Iraq in preparation for the census in October. On the day of the census, COSIT's plan calls for a special curfew to be imposed while some 200,000 census workers (mainly teachers) will fan out and count families down to the sub-district level. An interagency census committee has been formed to ensure coordination across GOI ministries.

¶3. (C) Dr. al-Alak told Poloff that the GOI is planning to seek assistance from other countries in an effort to count Iraqis abroad. He said that the GOI was disappointed with previous out-of-country census efforts because there was inadequate coordination, resulting in undercounting. The Census Committee, in coordination with Ministry of

Displacement and Migration and the Ministry of Human Rights, was working on a time frame for a census to be held abroad. He also stated that participation will be voluntary rather than required.

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Be Careful What You Ask For  
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14. (C) Comment: The census has particular significance for Iraq's various ethnic and religious minorities, who feel that their political representation is not commensurate with the size of their communities. At the same time, all of Iraq's minority communities have witnessed precipitous declines in their numbers since 2003 as thousands have fled the country's violence for the relative safety of Jordan and Syria. Even if it includes refugee minority communities in Syria and Jordan, the census will force Iraq's minority communities to come to grips with the reduced sizes of their communities. End comment.

15. (C) Since the passage of the national census law, Iraqi political leaders of all persuasions have sought to influence the Ministry of Planning on which information would be solicited with respect to religious sect and ethnicity. The result has been numerous iterations of the census form and pervasive rumors as to which questions would be included. For example, in early May, Christian Member of Parliament (MP) Yonadam Kanna told Poloff that the Iraqi census would include a question on Iraqis' ethnic identity with the categories broken down to include: Arab, Kurd, Turkmen, Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac, Armenian, Shabak, and other. On

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May 11, Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Salim told Poloff that the census would include a question on religious sect, asking Iraqi Muslims if they were Sunni or Shia.

16. (C) Whether in response to the growing concerns being raised about the sectarian implications of asking too many detailed questions about ethnicity and religious sect or whether these questions were never in fact being seriously considered, the Ministry of Planning tells us that it has adopted a census form that keeps its requests on the issues of religion and ethnicity circumspect. In the Iraqi census form provided to Poloff on June 27 by Minister of Human Rights Selim (repeated requests to get the form directly from the Ministry of Planning going unanswered), there is no question that asks Iraqis to identify their ethnic affiliation. With respect to religion, the census form asks Iraqis if they are Muslim, Christian, Sabeen, Yazidi, Jewish, or other, but there is no question that asks for religious sect (i.e., Sunni, Shia, Catholic, Orthodox).

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Are You Ready?  
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17. (C) By and large, Christian leaders have reconciled themselves to the fact that the census will indicate a dramatic decrease in their numbers in Iraq. Bishop Shlaimon Wardouni of the Chaldean Church, for example, admitted to Poloff that "our (Christian) number is very low" and estimated the figure at 500,000, down from 800,000 a few years ago. Alex Terchanian, an Armenian Christian and the Speaker of Parliament's National Security Advisor, stated that the census could reveal the Christian community in Iraq to be very small, perhaps as low as 300,000. At the same time, a few Iraqi Christian politicians believe that the census will help to provide clarity on minority demographics which they saw as a positive development. Former Minister of Population and Migration Pascale Warda, for example, told Poloff that there should be a census because Iraqi Christians were currently counted as Arabs and should rather be counted as Chaldo-Assyrians. Another political activist, Dr. Srood

Maqdasy of the Erbil-based Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) stated that the census is a "must" because the lack of verifiable information on Iraqi demographics gives people the power to corrupt the system and deny minorities their due representation.

18. (C) Christian leaders also are concerned as to how the census will count Iraqi refugees living in Syria and Jordan since these populations include high concentrations of Christians. On June 23, Christian MP Ablahad Sawa told Poloff that he had attended a meeting in the Parliament with Dr. Mehdi al-Alak from the Ministry of Planning. In that meeting, Sawa said he had suggested to Dr. al-Alak that census employees be stationed in Iraq's embassies in Jordan, Syria, and other countries for a period of not less than 15 days in order to give refugees ample opportunity to come and be counted. On June 28, MP Kanna told Poloff that he had just returned from visiting Christian refugees in Syria and claimed that there was virtually no information amongst the community about the census or what to do in order to be counted. Kanna suggested that the GOI begin a televised information campaign on Iraqi stations (which refugees continue to watch from abroad) that would let them know the dates and times that they should visit the Iraqi embassy to complete the census.

19. (C) Smaller religious groups like the Sabeen-Mandean and the Baha'is are sanguine in their outlook on the census. Husain al-Zuhairy, the Secretary of the Mandeian Council, told QHusain al-Zuhairy, the Secretary of the Mandeian Council, told Poloff on June 29 that there is nothing that the Mandean could do about the census given their small numbers so they might as well participate in order to make sure that they are counted. Abdel Razzaq Abaychi, the spiritual leader of Iraq's Baha'i community, told Poloff that the Baha'is very much want to participate in the census because they are not sure how many members remain in their community, as their religion has been outlawed since the 1970s (although it was included in Iraq's 1957 census). Abaychi hoped that the religion question on the census questionnaire would include a space for the Baha'is to write in their religion if it was not listed as one of the options.

110. (C) Conversely, Yezidi and Shabak political representatives in Baghdad have expressed concern that the census will put their communities under enormous pressure from the Kurdistan Region (KRG) to declare themselves to be ethnic Kurds so that their territories can be annexed to the KRG. Both members of Parliament Amin Farhan (Yezidi) and Hunein al-Qaddo (Shabak) were adamant in their statements to Poloff that Yezidis and Shabaks respectively were not Kurds. So great is their concern that al-Qaddo told Poloff on June 20 that he was planning to ask the Ministry of Planning to

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exclude disputed boundary areas in places like Ninawah from the census in order to spare the Shabaks from Kurdish intimidation. (Note: The recent inclusion of predominately Shabak and Yezidi villages in the territorial definition of Kurdistan in the recently passed KRG Constitution has reinforced minority concerns. End note.). Similarly, on July 23, Turkmen leaders publicly called for a delay in the census in order to determine which residents of Kirkuk should be counted and which should not. The same Turkmen leaders have threatened to boycott the census all together if their concerns are not addressed.

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Comment  
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111. (C) Most of Iraq's minority groups have reconciled themselves with the fact that the census will in fact take place in October (with the notable exception of the Turkmen) and are now working to ensure that it counts as many of their people as possible, especially among the refugee communities

located in Syria and Jordan. The concerns raised by the Yezidis and Shabaks may be moot given that the census form is not expected to ask Iraqis for their ethnic identification, although there is the possibility that the census form is not set in stone. The Embassy will continue to monitor the census preparations closely and to meet with minority leaders to ensure that their concerns are being addressed. End comment.

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